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ABSTRACT

Object relations theory offers the most viable explanation of the dynamics of sexually abused individuals by allowing for the conceptualization of an individual, whose earlier object relations left him barren, lonely, or neglected, as having a predisposition or vulnerability to abuse. Children with adequate nurturing experiences react negatively when confronted with sexual exploitation. Children suffering early deprivation may respond to the sexual situation as a means of satisfying needs other than erotic ones through the sexual channel. In examining how molestation affects development, it appears that children having some control over the adult in the sexual activity develop a precocious sexuality, an exaggerated sense of their own sexual power, and a corresponding lack of esteem for adults. Treatment of abuse victims tends to involve blaming the perpetrator and clearing the child of culpability, strategies that may leave the child with a sense of loss of mastery. Emphasis on the erotic exploitation of the individual is inadequate and belies the complexity of the situation. If the focus is enlarged from the sexual aspect to the inclusion of the child's unfulfilled needs and abandonments, a more complete picture is obtained. To formulate treatment in terms of the child's disappointment and betrayal rather than in terms of the culpability of the perpetrator makes the child the star. (NB)

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The Fallacy of Victimization in the Treatment
of Sexual Abuse

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The abandonment of the seduction theory enabled Freud to develop the concept of drive as the motivating force in psychic activity. The question arises as to whether Freudian theory is applicable to those individuals who have been sexually abused. Can we assume that behavior is expressive of a sexual drive, when there is an external force propelling the activity? Indeed, treatment for molested individuals relies on portraying them as victims rather than as drive driven. Yet, there are those who conceive of the child's participation in the abuse as a manifestation of his/her own sexual drive.

Conscious or unconscious participation of the child was emphasized by Abraham (1907) who stated that the child's wishes are inevitably present; that sexually abused children may not resist and may often play an active and even initiating role. Supporting this belief are old studies by Bender and Blau (1937) and Revitcha and Weiss (1950). However, a child's participation need not be an expression of the sexual drive. In this instance, it is the impetus that changes. Unlike Freud's belief that the object of the drive is the most readily changed, in sexual molestation, we have

an example of an impulse that is altered to obtain an object. So a drive for attention or warmth is transferred to a sexual aim.

Object relations theory offers the most viable explanation of the dynamics of sexually abused individuals. It allows for the conceptualization of an individual, whose earlier object relations left him barren, lonely or neglected, as having a predisposition or vulnerability to abuse. Such individuals respond to the sexual situation as a means of satisfying needs other than erotic ones through the sexual channel. Children with adequate nurturing experiences react negatively when confronted with sexual exploitation. They protest the initial encounter and avoid intimate situations with the perpetrator. They have the foresight to resist the seduction and the capacity to avoid repetitions; they have the confidence that their story will be believed, and that adults will resume the protector role.

Children suffering early deprivation will respond differently. They will be more easily seduced. They may even become interested and enticed. Often the perpetrator does not achieve his goal through intimidation and terror, but is kindly and gentle. Individuals with early mothering

experiences which were cold, indifferent, preoccupied or unavailable, will see this new situation as an opportunity to attain longed-for attention and warmth. In such cases, participation in incest can be viewed as a compensation for exaggerated maternal frustrations. Symbolically, the penis is substituted for the breast and as such becomes a substitute for the oral frustration inflicted by the mother. Rascovsky and Rascovsky (1950) noted that maternal deprivation was evident in incest victims of both sexes. Rosenfeld (1977), in a study done at Harvard found that children's motivation for their participation in incest not only included a desire for missed affection, but also the wish to get revenge against the hated and depriving Preoedipal mother.

Rarely are early unmet needs satisfied in this type of sexual relationship. The child is once again betrayed. But this betrayal comes not only from the sexually inappropriate behavior of the adult, but from the inconsistency of it, or the loss of control of the relationship or the activity. In cases where the molestation does not derive from intimidation, there may inconsistent behavior on the part of the perpetrator. There will be times when the perpetrator is

warm and interested in the child; these are the times when no one else is present. There may be times when the perpetrator ignores the child and behaves in a distant manner; these are the times when other adults are present. Perhaps, the betrayal felt by the child in this situation stems from the coldness that is shown in the company of other adults, and not from the helplessness derived from the sexual activity. The disappointment the child feels is not in the inappropriate sexual behavior that is foisted upon him/her, but in finding yet another adult that is inconsistent and self-centered.

The psychological effects on the child will depend on the age in which the sexual activity begins, the pattern of the occurrence, the gender of the individuals, the characteristics of the adult, the family constellation and the level of ego development the child has achieved. Sexual exploitation of an infant, particularly one that is below the age of three and has not yet completed separation-individuation, is so severe that self-other boundaries can remain undifferentiated and major character pathology will result. More "gentle" molestations occurring in older children may result in less severe pathology.

Incestuous fantasies are universal, and there is no definitive proof that nonbrutal incestuous fantasies that become reality are always deleterious. According to Margolis (1977) it is possible that a relationship, even one defined as taboo, may leave a person better equipped in the world than no relationship in all. In many cases, the incestuous relationship provided the child with at least some caring in an otherwise depriving environment. Research (Fredrich et al, 1986) suggests that as a group, sexually abused children demonstrate more behavior problems than non sexually abused, normal children, although when compared with a sample of psychiatric outpatients, sexually abused children displayed less severe psychopathology . Katan (1973) presented data suggesting that early sexual events can prevent psychosis. With extreme maternal deprivation, sexual molestation may provide a needed object and rescue from the emptiness of the maternal relationship.

Jung (1916) viewed the taboo against incest as a social development which forced sexually mature children to move away from their original family. The taboo performs a cultural and patriarchal function, it prevents complete satisfaction and engulfment in the family of origin, thus

promoting separation. Indeed, when separation is not of value, incest becomes acceptable and even a privilege but one that is usually reserved for gods and royalty. The Bible describes incidents of incest, including Adam and Eve, and Lot and his daughters. The brother-sister marriages of ancient Egyptian royalty are well known. But for most of us, separation from the primary family is desired and incest is viewed unfavorably.

While data suggests that sexually abused children suffer ego and self deficits, the families involved are highly dysfunctional. Under these conditions, can one necessarily conclude that the children's pathology is a result of the sexual molestation, rather than the product of the total environment, including inadequate early mothering and its ramifications on the development of self and ego?

Assuming there are existent ego deficits and self doubts which produce a vulnerability to molestation, how does the molestation affect development? The degree of trauma is related to the discrepancy between the intensity of molestation and the child's ability to cope (Steele 1990). Children having some control over the adult in the sexual activity develop a precocious sexuality, an exaggerated sense

of their own sexual power and a corresponding lack of esteem for adults. Males, in particular, may experience a sense of specialness, and a grandiose belief in their omnipotence (Shengold, 1980). This is caused by the active nature of their sexual participation as contrasted to the submissive stance of the female.

The literature relevant to mother-son incest falls into two ranges. The bulk describes severe psychopathology (including psychosis) due to the fact that sexually abusive mothers tend to exhibit greater psychopathology than sexually abusive fathers (Steele, 1990), and to commence the molestation at an earlier age than abusive fathers. A minority view holds that such incest is beneficial and uplifting (Shengold, 1980). The recent French film, "Murmurs of the Heart" depicted a mother son coitus that resulted in an awkward boy emerging into a confident man. Incest for the female does not produce the expansive results that may be found in son-mother coitus. Assessment of sexually abused females ranges from impaired reality testing to deflated self image. Molested females lose their sense of mastery to a greater degree than their male counterparts who can, theoretically, turn passive orality and anality into a

triumph over the phallic mother.

The effects of incest on female adolescent development has been studied by O'Brien (1987). He noted that such females lacked a positive sense of self and manifested various ego deficits such as poor reality testing, poor sense of mastery and insufficient separation from the family. Females experiencing fear and helplessness in the molest relationship will be more seriously damaged than those with a modicum of control. The greater the sense of helplessness, the more corrosive the damage to the self and the injury to basic trust. Incest damages the sense of self as there is a basic denial of the perceptions and feelings of the victim. Although this is done by the perpetrator, who seduces, then denies the wrongness of the act, there were earlier instances in which the child's reality and needs were if not violated, then discounted. And there is usually the current betrayal, in which the other parent denies the molestation. Sexual abuse is but another link in a chain of parental failure.

The term "sexual abuse" is a late comer to the field of trauma and has subsumed incest. The child, because of age, is considered the abused party, and the adult is considered the abuser, the person held responsible for the act. Yet, a

consensual definition of abuse has not been reached (Haugaard & Reppucci, 1989). Definitions of sexual abuse can range from a violation of bathroom privacy to oral and anal copulation. Emery (1982) states that calling an act abusive is not an objective decision, but a social judgment. Incest generally refers to sexual relations between people too closely related to marry. The submergence of incest, which has mythic and psychological connotations, into the category of sexual abuse, which is a legal term, has resulted in a corruption of treatment. Our laws do not account for the existence and culpability of the unconscious, or for complex family dynamics. Current treatment strategies (Sgroi, 1982, Haugaard & Reppucci, 1988) derive from the conception of the child as a victim and therefore are more related to the legal definition than the psychological one.

Treatment of abuse victims tends to follow a similar pattern: blaming and punishing the perpetrator and exposing his actions to the entire family, and of clearing the child of culpability. The primacy of culpability relates to the legal aspect which requires a crime and punishment. With it, more energy is expended punishing the culprit than in healing the victim.

It is assumed that the expiation of guilt on the child's part will diminish the sense of shame and wrong doing such children feel. However, it comes at the price of acknowledging the child's participation and the sense of mastery that derives from volition. Loss of mastery is a consequence noted by O'Brien (1987) in his study on the effects of incest on female adolescents. Here we find a treatment strategy that produces the same outcome as the molestation itself

Emphasis on the erotic exploitation of the individual is inadequate and belies the complexity of the situation. Focusing on the external sexual aspect, when there are other relevant, albeit unconscious, needs operating, distorts the episode, denies validation of the child and further sexualizes the individual. If the focus is enlarged from the sexual aspect to the inclusion of the child's unfulfilled needs and previous and subsequent abandonments, a more complete picture is obtained, and the consequent eroticization we see in sexually abused individuals could be diminished. Treatment rarely includes the possibility of a rapprochement between the individuals. The outcome of this breach is that an ambivalently perceived object is made

totally bad, and the child suffers yet another abandonment, and the loss of a partially good inner object.

To formulate treatment in terms of the child's disappointment and betrayal rather than in terms of the culpability of the perpetrator makes the child the star, and deals with his or her issues and not the projections and defenses of outsiders. Focus on the punishment of the perpetrator quells enraged social values and unconscious fears of adults. But the concomitant victimization of the child overlooks the complex nature of the child's participation and his or her unconscious motivations. By absolving and victimizing the child, treatment overlooks developmental factors, dynamic components and the volition of the child. In a sense, this treatment does to the child what it accuses the perpetrator of doing. It satisfies the needs of the adult at the expense of the child.

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